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Reviews for *The Way of Wyrd* include:

'A brilliant, vivid, entertaining and precise distillation of the scholarship on Anglo-Saxon sorcery, magic and shamanism . . . a refreshing reminder that the source of our heritage is both historical and perennial.'

R.D. Laing

'A compelling read. Brian Bates has brought vividly and sympathetically to life and light the innermost thoughts and spiritual feelings of 'Dark Age' Anglo-Saxon England. Profound human understanding and meticulous research have joined with a real writer's talent to produce the kind of book that I could not put down.'

Magnus Magnusson

'As a way of psychological and spiritual exploration it offers not just uncanny similarities with some of our present thinking, but notions which we seem only now to be rediscovering.'

The Guardian

'. . . a fast-paced tale about an Anglo-Saxon sorcerer and shaman which reads like a fusion of Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.'

Time Out

'A gripping and informative work of psychological archaeology . . . provides a unique insight into the authentic world and cosmology of the Anglo-Saxon shaman.'

East West Journal

'. . . a thoroughly engrossing story of a way of spiritual liberation that is all the more powerful because it echoes much of what is happening in the human psyche today . . .'

One Earth

THE Wisdom *of the* Wyrd

Brian Bates

By the same author

The Way of Wyrd
The Way of the Actor

THE Wisdom *of the* Wyrd

Brian Bates

RIDER

LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

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To the people of our ancient past,
for their wisdom and
inspiration down through the centuries

And to the memory of Violet Wood

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INTRODUCTION

The Ancient Wisdom of Our Ancestors

— Acknowledging Our Tribal Heritage —

Today many of us hunger for guidance on how best to live our lives. We feel that our personal and social experiences could be richer and more rewarding. This book offers a new path to sustenance; a journey into a way of wisdom which once was ours a thousand years ago, when we lived as indigenous peoples in ancient Europe. I believe that we need to rediscover the wisdom of our 'native' heritage, knowledge from our ancestors which can help to infuse our lives with new meaning.

Over the centuries our early tribal culture was overtaken by the forces of 'progress'. But today we are questioning the quality of our lives, even in the midst of the relative material comfort afforded us by this very progress. In the contemporary Western hemisphere we have all the advantages of modern science, engineering and medicine. But sophistication comes in many forms. Recently we have realised that the surviving indigenous peoples of the world, while less developed technologically than ourselves, nevertheless have knowledge about how to live which seems to be in tune with the deep harmonies of our souls, and to be in touch with important truths we have lost. Some may consider this to be romantic, but it does not take a deep analysis to acknowledge that we need urgently to re-vision our outlook in the face of the social, ecological, political and, most fundamentally, the deep psychological and spiritual crises facing us today.

Accordingly, in seeking ways to enrich our experience of life, an ever-increasing number of Westerners are turning to the insights of the shamans of indigenous cultures and the mystics of the ancient East,

in the belief that enduring truths about life and death may have survived with them. Today this search is central to the lives of millions of Westerners, people in Europe and North America, and other technologically developed societies such as Australia. It is no longer merely the passion of a small minority 'counter culture'. Many of us read books, watch television programmes, see feature films, and attend seminars and workshops about the wisdom of ancient cultures and indigenous peoples: the Buddhists of Tibet, the Native Americans, the Kogi of South America, the African Bushmen, the 'Dreamtime' practitioners of Australian Aboriginal culture, in search of inspiration in dealing with our personal lives and the great issues of our times.[1]

But now the indigenous cultures are beginning to put a stop to our enquiries into their sacred worlds. Some of the Native Americans, for example, pleased at first that their beliefs and practices were at last being treated with respect rather than vilification, are now changing their minds, feeling that 'white culture', which first stole their land, and then undermined their social structure, is now trying to steal their religion. Medicine peoples of many tribes have recently been forbidden by the tribal elders to teach their wisdom to the modern cultures of the West.[2] I find this backlash completely understandable.

It is also timely, for it may serve as the catalyst we need in order to embark on a journey long overdue; the rediscovery of our own sacred heritage, for we were all indigenous peoples once. So rather than travelling in miles to learn of the wisdom of other cultures, this book chronicles a different kind of journey. A journey in years. Our destination, the ancestors of many of today's Europeans and North Americans, is the largely forgotten civilisation of the forest peoples of Europe, the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic tribal cultures, the 'native Europeans' of one thousand years ago and more, and their ways of deep understanding which I have called the wisdom of the Wyrd.

Today the word 'weird' means 'strange'. Unexplainable. Odd. Something that is weird is beyond the scope of normal understanding. But in the ancient cultures of Europe, the word had a very different status. The original, archaic form meant in Anglo-Saxon 'destiny', but also 'power', or 'magic' or 'prophetic knowledge'.[3] 'Wyrd' still meant

the 'unexplainable', but the unexplainable was the sacred, the very grounding of existence, the force which underlay all life; it is a tradition from our own cultural heritage which parallels the great Tao of the East, the perennial wisdom of Buddhism, and the Great Spirit of the Native Americans.

— Rescuing Ancient Wisdom —

A thousand years sounds a long time when expressed in years, but it is only forty or fifty generations, and is a sufficient span to take us back to the historical period, when our ancestors lived in largely forested landscapes in small tribal communities of local chieftains, shamans, warriors, hunters and farmers. In some ways, of course, it is recent. Evidence of human habitation of western Europe goes back at least half a million years, to the time when elephants, rhinos and other large animals we associate with Africa today roamed the now tamed European countryside. But in the few centuries BC, the hundreds of tribal communities spread across mainland Europe and in Britain were living in ways that are beginning to be discernible to archaeologists and to scholars of early written records. While we need to build carefully from the evidence, an ancient world is undoubtedly beginning to emerge from the former shadows of our historical ignorance.

Tribal cultures all over the world, whether surviving today amidst the intervention of modern societies (precious few remain in anything like their former lifeways), or the thousands which once formed the characteristic way in which human communities formed, are specific in their complexity. Each small community has its pattern of custom and ritual, iconography and art, social organisation and deep spiritual identity. But having acknowledged the uniqueness of each tribal community, it is also the case that, when contrasted with contemporary Western society, the variation between tribal communities immediately pales into relative insignificance compared to their similarities. There is a commonality of experience, a core way of being in the world, which marks out their traditional ways of life as being radically different from contemporary culture as we experience it. And it is this level of analysis with which I am concerned in this book. While the

tribal life of ancient Europe was rich and varied, it was sufficiently homogeneous, in comparison with life today, to serve as a single destination for our journey back in time, especially in its pathways to the deep psychological and the sacred.

The 'tribal nature' of the settlements of ancient Europe was characterised by the presence of a chieftain (in Anglo-Saxon the term translates as 'head kinsman') who was considered sacred, full of mana or life force, with the tribe being perceived as his extended family, though symbolically rather than biologically. The identities of these small communities were consolidated by rituals and customs particular to each, and by totems or icons which symbolised that identity.[4] With few exceptions, I believe that these tribal peoples of ancient Europe experienced and practised in varying degrees the way of knowledge which I have characterised as the wisdom of the Wyrd.

In this book I detail material from tribal cultures which were located all over north-west Europe and into Scandinavia. A primary focus for my account of the wisdom of the Wyrd is England, partly because this is where I have done most of my research, but also because the culture of England throughout the first millennium (AD 0–1000) was representative of much of the lifeways of people all over Europe: migrants from these tribal groups came to England in large numbers early in the millennium to join the tribes already here, especially from those lands known now as Germany, Holland and Denmark, and there were more migrants (some would say invaders) later from Scandinavia (the Vikings) towards the end of the millennium. Also, England proved to be a volatile meeting ground for the two umbrella terms by which the tribal peoples of ancient Europe were often distinguished by scholars: the Germanic peoples (including Scandinavia), and the family of peoples known (to the Romans) as Celts. At the root of the distinction between the two designations of peoples were linguistic differences, but in a shifting kaleidoscope of migrating tribal groups this distinction can be overstated. In the last decade or two, modern historical scholarship has revised our view, and the two peoples are now seen as sharing spiritual, ritual and various other beliefs. Certainly warfare took place between tribes of the two peoples, but the process of migration, invasion and settlement of

the later Germanic groups on an island formerly occupied by mainly Celtic peoples is now understood as a much more complex array of relationships, from cooperation all the way to open antagonism.[5]

I concentrate mainly on the Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and Scandinavian tribal peoples, but also with some reference to those usually designated as Celtic. Partly this is because the Celtic tradition has been subject to considerably more investigation, focusing especially on the medieval legends of Merlin and Arthur, whereas very little attention has been paid at any level to the tribal wisdom of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples. The distinctions between the two groups of peoples are small compared with the commonality of experience consequent upon living as tribal peoples in landscapes relatively unformed by human intervention, and occasionally I have referred to Celtic tradition in those aspects of this study in which I believe the differences between the beliefs and practices of the people is negligible.[6]

The history of this period, while increasingly documented by archaeologists and historians, has been generally ignored in favour of the earlier cultures of Greece and Rome, although schoolchildren in north-west Europe are now beginning to be introduced to the history of their ancestors. Denigrated as the 'Dark Ages', it was considered, until recently, a regrettably primitive period which dominated Europe between the fall of the enlightened age of Roman occupation, at about AD 400, until the full advent of Christianity across Europe and into Scandinavia by around AD 1000. But research in a wide range of disciplines is revolutionising our view of the peoples of ancient Europe, and enables me to develop a very different perspective. I emphasise those aspects of our ancestors' culture from which I believe we can learn today, and while this analysis inevitably is not a comprehensive evaluation of every element of first-millennium living, and while I do not claim that the indigenous peoples of ancient Europe represent some sort of utopian society, they are far from being peoples of the 'dark ages'. Indeed, seen from the viewpoint of what they offer us today, the best of their ancient civilisation represents a millennium of glittering and glorious tribal culture which is rich in knowledge and insight in areas of life in which we are relative paupers.

— The Nature of Wyrd —

A main theme of this book concerns the rediscovery of the spiritual life of our ancestors. I illustrate how, most fundamentally, our tribal ancestors and the mystics of ancient Europe lived out a view of life called Wyrd: a way of being which transcends our conventional notions of free will and determinism. All aspects of the world were seen as being in constant flux and motion between the psychological and spiritual polarities of fire and ice: a creative, organic vision paralleling the classical Eastern concepts of yin and yang, and echoed by recent developments in theoretical physics in which the world is conceived of as relationships and patterns.

Following from the concept of Wyrd was a vision of the cosmos, from the gods to the Lowerworld, as being connected by an enormous, all-reaching system of fibres rather like a three-dimensional spider's web. Everything was connected by strands of fibre to the all-encompassing web. Any event, anywhere, resulted in reverberations and repercussions throughout the web. This image far surpasses in ambition our present views of ecology, in which we have extended our notions of cause and effect to include longer and more lateral chains of influence in the natural world. The web of fibres of the Anglo-Saxon shaman offers an ecological model which encompasses individual life events as well as general physical and biological phenomena, non-material as well as material events, and challenges the very cause and effect chains on which our ecological theories depend.

The Anglo-Saxon shamans, people who were believed to be able to mediate between the everyday world and the realm of the sacred, dealt directly with life force, a vital energy which permeated everything but which in humans was generated in the head, flowed down the spinal column and from there throughout the body. This system of energy, which has intriguing similarities to Eastern concepts of prana and chi, encapsulated physical, psychological and spiritual domains within a single, unified system. The manipulation of life force was central to the shamans' healing work, and has implications for much of the contemporary debate in holistic medicine concerning mind/body interaction,

healing energies, and complementary approaches to health. Life force connected individual human functioning with the pulses of Earth rhythm, a psychological and spiritual dimension of life which has been excluded by our technological cocoon.

A dynamic and pervasive world of spirits coexisted with the material world in Anglo-Saxon culture. The spirits, manifestations of forces pertaining to Wyrd, were invisible to most humans, although they played a prominent and superstitious role in the everyday lives of Anglo-Saxons. But the spirits were visible to the shamans, because shamans were people believed to be naturally endowed with perceptual abilities beyond the normal, abilities to see, hear and experience things which we would probably consign to the realms of the paranormal or madness. These abilities were recognised, cultivated and nurtured as evidence of a person's fitness for admission to the status of the shaman.

The spirits of our tribal ancestors seemed to give identity and form to many phenomena in life which contemporary psychology recognises but often fails to deal with directly: coincidence, deep-seated fears, psychic experiences, prophetic dreams and nightmares and other aspects of ourselves that remain unconscious. Recent developments in existential psychiatry and the new psychotherapies have begun to look for ways of working directly with these forces.

This, then, is a summary glimpse of a remarkable world view, a way of life.

Rediscovering Wyrd for Today

As a psychologist, I believe that the task which faces us in rediscovering the wisdom of our ancestors and evaluating its relevance for our lives today is not so much a reaching for something 'Other', something we do not possess, but instead a removal of the layers of ignorance and repression which prevent us from knowing what it is we already know, deep in our tribal cultural memory. The past is always within us, in our hearts and minds, just beneath the surface of life, encoded and embedded in a multitude of cultural forms and linguistic patterns which reach back to our tribal times, but which we no

longer recognise as having especial significance. This knowledge is in each of us, but confined to the deep unconscious, locked away, banished from everyday life. Sometimes it surfaces unbidden, in amusing and surprising ways.

For example, in the colloquial language of the 1960s, something approaching the ancient meaning of Wyrd re-emerged, even though we were unaware of the origins of the concept; 'Weird, man!' became a much-used phrase of 'hippy' streetwise society. The phrase was usually a response to an event, statement, thought or feeling which seemed to touch the 'beyond', the synchronous, the 'out of bounds'. In that decade, when mystical and spiritual concerns were being rediscovered, 'weird' coloured the strange or unexplainable qualities of life with a positive, approving, even reverential hue. It acquired a special significance. Now, 'Weird, man!' has become a cause for nostalgia, amusement, or embarrassment, depending upon one's opinion of 1960s culture.

It may be simply a bizarre coincidence that the word came back into some sort of special use. But since I believe that the original potency of the concept is embedded deep within our cultural heritage, it is quite possible that it re-emerged amidst the seeking-the-sacred culture of the 1960s, even if some aspects of that seeking may have been less deep than people would have wished.

Wyrd, along with many elements of ancient cultural psychology, has been encoded within the collective memory of the peoples of contemporary western Europe and North America since the original shamanic cultures of ancient Europe. The concept and energy of the principle has lain just beneath the surface of our consciousness in a shadow world, awaiting the time when it may again be needed in the light. Now is that time.

— Buddhist Beginnings —

More than twenty years ago, in California during the summer of 1971, I was on my way to visit one of the heroes of my young adulthood: the philosopher and writer Alan Watts. He was, and is still, two decades after his death, one of the most influential exponents of the great Eastern ways of liberation, especially the ageless wisdom of Buddhism and Taoism.[7]

In the early 1970s a questioning of cultural assumptions, and a seeking for clearer insights, new perspectives, better ways of understanding psychological, social and spiritual issues was gathering momentum. Like many others interested in such things, I had been enchanted, inspired, and stimulated by the writings of Alan Watts. His lucid introductions to the wisdom of the East had opened up undreamed-of psychological and spiritual vistas for us: notions that while material comfort is not to be scorned, it means nothing without the deeper dimensions to life; that many of the bases on which we were living our daily lives rested on assumptions which were culture-specific and were not the only ways to see things, indeed were not, in his view, the best way to see things. The way we defined and understood ourselves as individuals, our notions of love, energy, freedom, our models of health and healing, the role of fantasy and imagination in life, techniques of meditation, deep connections between people and the environment: these and other ideas were called into question through his lucid books.

Like many other young people who had come to value his work, I had gone to university to study the traditions of the Western scientific paradigm; in my case in the psychology laboratories of the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Oregon. In these institutions I trained as a scientific psychologist. Today, a quarter of a century later, I run research studies at the University of Sussex, investigating altered states of consciousness. But this is not the path that led me to the wisdom of Wyrd. For try as we might to live our lives rationally, to make 'sense-ible' decisions, most of us realise that choices about life paths are rarely intellectual ones. No matter how hard we try to identify and articulate our options, in reality we are attuning to an inner pattern which is already unfolding.

Most of us had vivid inner lives as children. But as we grow up we all learn to subjugate the imaginal, to deny that realm of experience in favour of the consensually validated 'real world'. But it has often struck me that the ways that enable us to move forward in life involve going back to the realm of inner experience, re-entering the image

world we knew as children and returning to that source of wisdom which, as adults, we have forgotten. The experiences are not new, they are renewed.

In retrospect, I can see that my path into the culture of Wyrd actually started in my childhood. During the period from four to nine years of age, I had many recurring dreams involving wolves and eagles, and also experienced compelling visions during the fevers of illnesses. These propelled me inwards to the imagery of the unconscious. And so years later as a doctoral student in California and Oregon I knew, even as I calculated the statistics and carried out the scientific analyses necessary for my objective, outerworld-directed research, that empirical psychology could not encompass some of the deeper issues which fascinated me. I began to suspect that the clues to our self-understanding lay not in the mere detailed amassing of facts about observable behaviour in empirical psychology, but rather were waiting to be discovered in the wisdom traditions of the world; the great storehouse of knowledge about the human spirit which has been built up over the centuries in every culture and encoded in the organic computers of religion, ritual and artistic expression.

This is when I had discovered the work of Alan Watts, and along with my scientific work I began reading about, and practising, the meditative disciplines of the great Eastern traditions of Zen and Tao. The dream was to balance the applied power of Western science and technology with the wisdom of the East, a wisdom which might help us to know how to apply such science as a benefit to the Earth and not a curse. This dream has not been accomplished, of course; we have the knowledge, technology and wealth to feed the world, but still people starve in famines as wretched as we have ever known.

My excitement mounted as I turned into the long, hidden driveway of Watts's mountain retreat on Mount Tamalpais, just north of San Francisco, edging the car along the rough track which snaked towards his house through the groves of tall, silvery eucalyptus trees, their leaves whispering in the wind like the breakers on a seashore. I had a particular reason for wishing to visit him, to ask his advice. Like Watts, I had been born and raised in England, and had moved as a young adult to the United States. I had lived there for ten years,

during which time I had become involved in the beliefs and practices of Buddhism. But now, having just returned to England, thousands of miles further from the East than I had been in California, something else was stirring in my mind. Something connected with the landscape of England, with the heritage of the West. Inspired as I was by the Eastern wisdoms, I wondered nevertheless whether the West might, at one time, have had a parallel way, a tradition for entering the world of the sacred, of the intuitive, of the deep psyche.

Alan Watts was warm and friendly, and took me to the small building he used as his library and study. This was quite remarkable. It was constructed from a very large redwood water barrel, which had been placed on a wooden deck clinging to the edge of the mountain slope. A tall, conical roof extended over the sides of the barrel, screening the wooden walkway. Inside, the study was round, with a white-carpeted floor, and a large single-paned window looking down over the side of the mountain. Bookshelves encircled the room, with beautifully handwritten labels dividing his collection into subjects; psychology, Buddhism, Taoism, philosophy and so on. And his desktop was made of maple wood, with the outside edge still in its original form, rather than being sawn off straight. Above the desk was an opaque stained-glass panel which admitted a soft light. On cushions, in this magical room, we sat and discussed the issue I had come to ask him.

We talked of early mystical Christianity, its wonders and strengths, failings and disappointments as part of the heritage of the West. But I was seeking something other than this, perhaps an earlier tradition, less a religion and more in tune with the sacred paths of spiritual liberation of the Buddhists and Taoists. I put to him whether England could ever have had such a way of liberation.

He liked this question. It made him laugh. He thought about it for a while. After each question I put to him, there followed a brief pause while he contemplated it, and then a cogent, sometimes witty reply; an answer delivered with erudition but no trace of smugness. This time he thought longer. When he responded, it was to encourage me in the view that every culture has at some time in its history evolved teachings and techniques which enable individuals to transcend conventional reality in search of a separate vision; a dimension in which

our notions of time, space and causality are integrated in a way which helps us, in ordinary consciousness, to live more fully, more wholly. We discussed sources, books, traditions, including the Druids and alchemy. He was enormously well read, and his mentoring at the start of my project was invaluable.

Perhaps most of all, I remember his laugh. When Alan Watts laughed, he made the most wonderful, warm, knowing, chuckling sound, like a bubbling spring emanating from the deepest waters of life. He believed that scholarship, contemplation and practical work should all be undertaken with sincerity and integrity, but not with seriousness. For the very grip on the mind and emotions which seriousness imposes strangles the flow of originality, spontaneity and flair which such work requires. I like to think that wisdom, whenever and wherever we encounter it, brings forth a laugh like Alan's, and that a deep chuckle lies at the heart of the cosmos.

When I finally left, I felt that I had been given the best start imaginable: a sense of personal destiny, a quest which would occupy much of my adult life, although I was not to know that then. A few weeks later I returned to England and eagerly began my search for a Western tradition which might parallel some of the perspectives of the East.

— The Anglo-Saxon Spellbook —

In the vaults of the British Museum Library is stored a small book of spells, written in England about one thousand years ago, but reckoned by historians to reflect oral traditions stemming from many centuries earlier. It is a handbook of magical and medical remedies, initiation procedures, incantations and rituals for an indigenous shaman of ancient Europe. This ancient book changed my life.[8]

Discovering it took about three years. I had begun my quest for a Western path by studying the Druids. Contemporary British Druids (famous for their summer solstice rituals at Stonehenge) have an approach to spirituality which reflects a deep reverence for the landscape and the sacred forces of nature. They look to the ancient Druids of two thousand years ago as a source of inspiration, although they do not claim direct descendance from them. Because my goal was to find

a path from the ancient Western tradition, I set out to find documentation on the original Druidic beliefs and practices, but became frustrated by the paucity of material. I wanted a Western way which could be grounded on a more substantial foundation of historical authenticity. The contemporary Druidic path is rich with insight, but was not the one that I was seeking.[9]

I then studied alchemy, a tradition which conjures up images of ancient, secret laboratories in which eccentric seekers heated and distilled substances in crucibles in a vain attempt to create gold from base metals. This is a caricature, of course, for the alchemical practices included sophisticated meditations focused on inner and outer transformation. These practices taught me how to be sensitive to inner change, how to observe the workings of the psyche in response to archetypal imagery, and how to use external objects and interactions as metaphors for internal work. I am still fascinated by alchemy, but as a system alchemy was largely a private, inner discipline.[10] After a time, I realised that I was looked more for a folk-way, a path which might entail some esoteric knowledge, but which had been, and could be again, more widely accessible.

But then I came to witchcraft, or Wicca. This is a very rich vein of wisdom. I was fortunate to be able to study with some remarkable women, who taught me things that would be important for my later understanding of Wyrd. But while I became convinced of the spiritual depths of the craft of Wicca, the necessary details were not to be found in the witch-hunting documents of the Middle Ages, in which women were required, often under torture, to confess to acts defined by the Church as devilish. But as I continued to read further and further back in history, looking for the origins of the beliefs which were so distorted in the trials, the tomes referred to material increasingly ancient, the language ever more archaic.[11]

Finally, I found what I was looking for, although I had not been sure in what form it would appear. As I delved deeper into the historical roots of Wicca, I came upon a reference to the existence of an obscure document which is essentially the healing manual, or 'spellbook', of an indigenous, pre-Christian healer or shaman from the Anglo-Saxon tribal culture of ancient England. The historical sources

I was consulting described the book as a collection of 'charms': magical healing remedies, rituals and incantations which, historians reckon, were written down by Christians in the tenth or eleventh century, although the material had probably been passed down orally for several hundred years, from the pre-Christian era. I refer to this text as the *Anglo-Saxon Spellbook*, or just the *Spellbook*.

— Scribes: *Secret Incantations* —

Dotted around the forested landscape of early Europe were monasteries housing Christian missionaries. Their task was to convert the natives to Christianity. Many of the Church officials openly condemned indigenous beliefs and practices, and set out to eradicate them. However, despite the public proclamations of the Christian officials, nothing is ever quite so black and white as it first seems. While 'official' Christianity had a mission to convert the indigenous tribespeople of western Europe to the path of Christ, the individuals who served as monks were not clones stamped out of an evangelical machine; some of them understood and respected the ways of the indigenous peoples. At least, that is one interpretation of the motives behind the monastic recording of the healing spells of native healers, shamanic practitioners of the way of Wyrd, in the *Anglo-Saxon Spellbook*.

The *Anglo-Saxon Spellbook* was written in the AD 900s or 1000s, certainly in a monastery and probably, in the view of several historians of Anglo-Saxon England, by scribes or initiates rather than monks. For although the entries of healing remedies, with plant concoctions, rituals and incantations, were usually 'Christianised', by for example replacing the names of 'pagan' gods and goddesses with those of Christian saints, nevertheless the material is strongly pre-Christian, and some of it is so intimately connected with initiation rites into Wyrd mysticism that it is surprising that the material was collected at all. Certainly, historians reckon, the material was probably too controversial to have been written by the monks.[12]

It is wonderful that it *was* recorded, of course, for the monasteries were one of few settings for narrative writing; the indigenous cultures

of north-west Europe were based on oral transmission of knowledge, and without the documents prepared by the Christians (including their condemnatory diktats!) we would have far less information about the native traditions than we have. Usually writing in the monasteries was confined to the preparation of copies of classical medical texts, and the language employed was Latin, the international language of the Church. But the *Spellbook* was written in Anglo-Saxon, the spoken language of the tribespeople.

We do not know precisely why the *Spellbook* was written. Perhaps the healing spells were collected from an indigenous 'informant', a knowledgeable native healer, in case they actually worked! The monks were active in arranging medical clinics (mainly for their own use, although they sometimes made available their medical expertise to the local inhabitants, as missionaries do to this very day), and may have wished to incorporate native knowledge into their practice.

Another possibility is that the spells were required to be recorded by the scribes as an exercise in writing in the vernacular Anglo-Saxon, although this seems unlikely, for there must have been many less controversial subjects for such practice in penmanship.

Much more likely was that the *Spellbook* was prepared from field research by a scribe who had been sent to travel in the pagan lands of the area to gather information on how the indigenous practitioners carried out their healing; this would have been useful 'intelligence' for the monks in their bid to counter the native healers and replace them with their own approach to medicine. The *Spellbook* would have been, from this perspective, a 'research document', prepared for political purposes.

— The Manuscript —

The *Spellbook* is a small manuscript of thick vellum leaves, with straight margins scratched down the left-hand side of each soft page with a sharp instrument. The magical and medical remedies are written in continuous text, although with several different handwriting styles, suggesting that it had been transcribed by more than one person. And to indicate the point in the narrative where a new medical or magical entry begins, there is drawn in the margin a little cartoon-

like diagram of a hand with a finger pointing to the first line, and to mark the end is sketched a cartoon foot.

Seeing these small marginal notes using hands and feet as paragraph markers made me laugh, and I felt a thrill of empathy, a warm sense of connection with the person who had drawn them. It may be that they were not meant by the artist to be humorous, simply indicative of paragraph breaks. Nevertheless, the images were so informal and appealing, and such a contrast to the careful calligraphy of the Anglo-Saxon text, that they reminded me vividly of the fact that the *Spellbook* was a living piece of documentation put together by our ancestors.

The entries in the book make fascinating reading; I shall detail some of them later, but essentially they each comprise a description of symptoms of an illness, a herbal or plant remedy, and a ritual indicating how and when the remedies should be applied, as for example over 'running water' or 'at full moon'. Sometimes incantations are transcribed to be sung along with the remedies. While most of the entries were healing remedies and herbal treatments, I also discovered among them rituals, guidelines and texts for shamanic initiation and training. The manuscript was an entry into the world view of the people of ancient Europe.

— Sources of Knowledge —

The source material is substantial for reconstructing the way of Wyrd, the world view behind the manuscript, but is widely scattered in sometimes obscure manuscripts, books, journals, and museums throughout the academic world. One of my main tasks over the years has been to pull together this information and integrate it, a process rather like weaving a tapestry. I have consulted sources in disciplines as diverse as the history of medicine, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Germanic social history, Icelandic sagas, comparative mythology, folklore studies, archaeology, anthropology and, of course, psychology. While I feel fully expert only in this last discipline, I have sought to incorporate the expertise of leading scholars in all the other disciplines in putting together my research programme. I have indicated generally accessible sources in the notes and bibliography at the end

of the book, so that readers who wish to explore for themselves may follow up particular aspects of the wisdom of the Wyrd.

The evidence shows that in early western Europe a thousand years ago, shamans, whom we now recognise as the inspired mystics and healers of traditional societies, served our tribal ancestors by communicating with a world beyond everyday life, an 'Otherworld' regarded as sacred. Using techniques for altering their states of consciousness, these shamans of Wyrd were able to 'vision' beyond ordinary sight, travel to and communicate with the spirit world, and bring back to the rest of the tribal communities stories and healing insights which formed the elements of the wisdom of the Wyrd.[13]

— The Way of Wyrd —

After the first ten years of my research into the ways of our ancestors, I published a book, *The Way of Wyrd*,[14] which detailed the process of initiation into the mystical and shamanic secrets of the practitioners of Wyrd. I constructed that book as a documentary novel (with bibliography), trying to bring to life the atmosphere and flavour of such a way of being. It attracted the interest of hundreds of thousands of readers in Europe and America, and in translation into German and French. This enormous level of interest has encouraged me now, ten years further on in my research, to write this book, this time non-fiction, in which I detail wider aspects of Wyrd, reflecting the mass of documentation I have collected since then.

Also since the publication of *The Way of Wyrd*, I have sought to bring the insights I was reconstructing from the wisdom of Wyrd not only into my own life, but also into the lives of a wide variety of people through my therapeutic work with individual clients, in lectures and tutorials in universities and other settings, and in the many seminars and workshops I have had the opportunity to lead around the world in which I have attempted to introduce people to the teachings of Wyrd in a more directly experiential way. Along with my recounting of the ancient ways of Wyrd, I have included examples of these attempts to bring the teachings to life for our practical benefit today.

— So What Happened to Wyrd? —

So what happened to Wyrd? Religious suppression. Early Christianity, as an evangelical religion with political power behind it from Rome, drove Wyrd underground. The sacred traditions of the indigenous peoples who were our ancestors were lost as surely as are those of the disappearing tribes around the world today. It seems to have been yet another example of our age-old curse: the human inability to come to terms with sacred realms free of political tyranny. The way of Wyrd disappeared beneath the waves of 'progress', slipping ever deeper into the obscurity our historians denigrated as the Dark Ages.

But a thousand years and more have passed. While today, sadly, in some regions of the Earth there are wars still being fought on religious grounds, on the whole Christianity is no longer such an evangelising, missionary movement. In an age of ecumenical sympathies, coexistence of spiritual paths is once more becoming possible. We are also now much more aware than we used to be of the fact that we live, and need to coexist, in a multi-faith world.

In considering here the wisdom of our ancestors, I do not present it as an exclusive path. I take the view that there are many paths to God. But I believe that in that multi-faith world, it is imperative that the ancient wisdom of the Wyrd reasserts its rightful position alongside the other great spiritual traditions. This book is about how we can rekindle Wyrd wisdom in the intimacy of our own lives, and allow its light to illuminate our personal search for knowledge and the sacred.

CHAPTER ONE

How Our Ancestors Lived

— The Forest People —

From an aeroplane on a clear day, the lush green landscape of England looks like a patchwork of farm fields, with scattered settlements connected with ribbon roads, and punctuated by great towns and cities. But two thousand years ago, if we could have made the same airborne survey, the land would have appeared radically different. At this time, before the centuries of forest clearing for agriculture and building, great woodlands covered the island, broken only by tracts of open heath and moorland and hilltops ridged with scrub cover.[1] Scattered within this forest landscape, a few hundred thousand of our 'native' ancestors lived in small tribal societies. The same scene was repeated all over western and northern Europe.

The shadows of the old world still fall across today's landscape, for many of the names of these early forests survive. In the middle of Britain, for example, forests called Dean, Morfe and Kinver each covered scores of square miles, and dense stands of oak and ash formed the forest called Sherwood, later famed as the hiding place of the legendary outlaw Robin Hood. Hornbeam, thorn, oak and ash covered much of south-east Britain, where the great forest of Andred was described by an annalist writing in the year 892 as '30 miles wide and stretching 120 miles from east to west'. On the small island of Britain, forests of this extent dominated the landscape.

Small groups of hunter-gathering people had inhabited the island for thousands of years, but the population had begun to increase during the last few centuries BC when tribal groups, subsumed for convenience now under the umbrella title of 'Celtic peoples', came across to Britain from the European mainland. They formed a rich and